



16. CHRISTMAS IN PHILADELPHIA

On the Friday before Christmas, James, Ralph, Albus, and Lucy made their way to the Warping Willow, duffle bags slung over their shoulders and breaths of mist puffing into the frigid air. The first snow of the season had fallen that morning, covering the campus with a blanket of sparkling white and effectively hiding all of the flagstone paths, so that the four left winding, crisscrossing trails of footprints across the mall.

Once they congregated under the Tree, Lucy spoke the incantation that James had first heard from the undead Professor Straidthwait's account of the night Ignatius Magnussen had escaped.

"*Abitus*," she said, tapping the snow-crueted trunk with her wand. She turned to James as the Tree began to move subtly all around them. "Professor Remora taught me that."

James nodded, not explaining that he'd heard it himself from a different professor. Lucy sidled next to him, shoulder to shoulder, and her gloved hand laced fingers with his. James' face reddened a little and he looked away, watching as the campus became hidden behind the shifting whip-like branches of the Warping Willow.

The transition to the outside was swifter than that which occurred whenever Professor Baruti took his Potion-Making class to visit Madam Ayasha in the old Indian city of Shackamaxon. Within a few seconds, a push of wintry air shivered the Tree's branches and James saw the tiny walled courtyard beyond. Snow still frosted the ground, turning the trash-strewn yard into something nearly as magical as the university they had just left.

"Merry Christmas, friends," a deep grating voice said as the four stepped into the dull daylight. Flintlock stood near the gate, his rocky face sculpted into a crooked smile. His diamond eyes sparkled happily.

“Hey, Flintlock!” Albus cried, stepping to pat the rock troll on his huge rough elbow, which was as high as the boy could reach. “Aren’t you cold? It feels like about fifty below out here!”

“Cold?” the troll repeated slowly. “I suppose the temperature has dropped a tiny bit, hasn’t it? I’d barely noticed.”

“Barely noticed!” Albus scoffed. “Last time we saw you, it was the end of summer. I could have fried a flobberworm on your forehead at noon.”

The troll shrugged, making a sound like boulders rolling on gravel. “I have found that you humans are far more affected by tiny shifts in the weather than am I. You may not be aware that I was born in the crucible of the earth’s furnace, where lakes of lava wash on beaches of pumice. I remember it only vaguely, but fondly. When the temperature reaches five thousand degrees, *then* I will comment on the weather, as do you.”

Albus shook his head. “You won’t be commenting on it to *me*, that’s for sure.”

The troll nodded and chuckled. With one languid movement, he reached for the gate. It squeaked noisily as he wrenched it open. A long brown car was waiting next to the curb beyond, a plume of exhaust dancing behind it. The passenger’s window powered partly down and James spied his Uncle Percy in the driver’s seat.

“Come on, you lot,” he called. “Boot’s open. Throw your bags back there and pile in. Hello Lucy dear! Happy Christmas, all of you!”

“Happy Christmas, Dad,” Lucy called, finally unlacing her fingers from James’ hand as she angled toward the boot of the car. James breathed a sigh of entirely mixed emotions.

It was very warm in the car as Uncle Percy navigated the narrow, slushy streets, muttering to himself in irritation at the slowness of the Muggle traffic and occasionally tapping the horn, making fussy little *bleeps*. James took off his stocking cap and stared out the windows, watching the city go by.

The drive took rather longer than James had expected, and James recognized vaguely that they were passing through the historical section of the city. He wished that Zane had come along with them for Christmas, if only so he could tell them about the buildings they were passing, his infectious enthusiasm brightening what was, otherwise, a fairly boring trek. As it was, the blonde boy had left school the day before, taking the train back to his parents’ house in Kirkwood, Missouri. Before Zane had departed, however, James had finally decided to share with both he and Ralph some of the things that he had thus far kept a secret.

He’d begun by telling them about the strange prediction that had occurred during his Precognitive Engineering midterm, when he had envisioned the strange, impending convergence between the mysterious lady, himself, and the twin entities of Petra and Morgan, somehow separate even though they were both merely parts of the same person.

Then, because the two seemed vaguely connected, he’d described his last encounter with Professor Trelawney in the dawn corridors of Hogwarts, the day when they had begun their journey.

Zane and Ralph had listened with wide eyes, obviously understanding the significance of such a haunting prophecy coming from the lips of the otherwise comical old professor.

Finally, James had reminded them of what had happened on the stern of the *Gwyndemere*, when he had miraculously conjured the shining silver thread that had saved Petra's life. He explained that the thread was still there, still somehow connecting him to her, and that that was how he knew she could be trusted.

"I can see her dreams and feel her thoughts, sometimes," he'd said, although he hadn't told them about the written dream, the one that had conjured the frightening vision of the nightmare island and the black castle, before vanishing entirely. He had vowed to Petra not to tell anyone about the dream story and he meant to keep that promise. "I know that she's telling the truth about not being involved with the attack on the Vault of Destinies, no matter what we saw on that night. It couldn't have been her because when she says she wasn't there, I can sense that she's telling the truth. I don't think she could lie to me even if she wanted to."

James didn't really know if this was true or not, but he *did* know that she sincerely believed that she was innocent. This was what he had most wanted to impress upon Zane and Ralph, since their belief in that fact was going to be essential to the success of their attempts to clear her name.

"We'll work it all out after Christmas break," Zane had said eagerly. "You spend some time working on your cousin Lucy. After all, Rose is right: if we don't know what the dimensional key is, we won't recognize it when we follow Magnussen into the past. Lucy's all googly-eyed for you, so it should be no problem to convince her to let us scour Erebus Castle for clues."

James' cheeks had heated a bit at that. "She's not googly-eyed for me. She's my cousin, if you remember."

"Have you taken a good look at her lately?" Zane had asked, cocking his head and pointing at his face. "Not much of a family resemblance. I'd guess the only blood you share is the blood pudding you all put away last Weasley family picnic."

"Shut up," James had protested. "You're daft."

Ralph had shrugged with one shoulder. "I think he's right, James. Even Rose and Scorpius say so. Rose says Lucy's been sweet on you ever since last year."

James hadn't been able to argue it any further. He knew that it was true, as uncomfortable as it made him. He was, however, a little rankled about the fact that he'd been, apparently, the last person to find out about it. He couldn't quite bring himself to manipulate Lucy's feelings for him (whatever they were) to get a tour of Erebus Castle, but maybe if he just asked nicely, that would be enough. After all, she was his cousin. They'd always gotten on very well, which was more than he could say for some of his other cousins, particularly Louis. Why would Lucy say no?

Silently, James cursed himself for having asked Lucy to go to the Halloween Ball with him. Why hadn't Zane and Ralph warned him since they had all apparently known how Lucy felt about him?

“We’re almost there,” Lucy said from the front seat of the car, turning to smile back at James. “We’ll all be staying over at your parents’ flat for Christmas Eve. Won’t that be fun?”

James nodded and forced a smile. “Sure, Lu.”

Next to him, Albus began making obnoxious kissing noises. James shoved him hard enough to knock his hat off.

Uncle Percy parked the car in an underground parking structure and led the troop to the silvery doors of a large elevator.

“Muggle condominiums,” he said disdainfully, pressing the up button. “Refitted for magical occupancy, thankfully, at least on the thirteenth floor.”

The doors swooped open and the group clambered inside. There was no thirteen on the bank of lit buttons, but Percy didn’t seem to mind. Producing his wand, he tapped the buttons for floor number one and floor number three. Immediately, the doors shuttled closed again, and the elevator lurched, rocketing upwards much faster than any elevator James had ever ridden before. His feet left the floor for a split second as the lift shuddered to a sudden stop.

“Here we are,” Percy said briskly, watching as the doors socked open once more. James had expected a hallway, but the lift apparently opened directly onto his parents’ flat. It was quite large and open, with high ceilings, heavy decorative woodwork, and a rather baroque chandelier hanging over the entryway. From the perspective of the open elevator, the living spaces all seemed to run together, forming an airy blend of kitchen, dining room, and parlor. James’ sister Lily was seated at the dining room table across from Izzy, a collection of half-decorated sugar cookies and colored icings spread between them.

“They’re here!” Lily called, looking up and grinning.

Behind James, Percy sighed. “Being Head Auror,” he muttered, stepping into the high foyer, “certainly has its perks.”



Shortly after their arrival, Uncle Percy left again, meaning to pick up Molly at the nearby magical elementary school and then collect Audrey at their flat. Ralph joined Lily and Izzy in icing duties, using his wand to recolor the icings with stripes, sparkles, and the occasional flashing Rudolph red. Izzy laughed out loud, which was not the sort of thing girls often did around Ralph.

He appeared quite pleased with himself and James was glad. Lucy and Albus went upstairs to explore the bedrooms and stake out the best beds for themselves while James climbed onto a stool near the kitchen and pulled a plate of tiny mincemeat pies toward himself.

“Your father’s still at work,” Ginny, James’ mum, said with a hint of worry in her voice. She was in the kitchen, cooking madly, as she was wont to do whenever she was fretting. Back at Marble Arch, Albus had had a pet name for their mum whenever she got like this. “Look out,” he’d say, usually slamming the bedroom door behind him, “Hurricane Ginny’s on the rampage. Tie everything down before she blows in here and gives it a good cleaning.”

“That’s an awful lot of puddings,” James commented, peering over the countertop. “Expecting the Harriers for dinner, are we?”

Ginny sighed and dusted her hands on her apron. She took a moment to look around at the crowded countertops. “You know,” she replied, “whenever Christmas comes around, I seem to forget that I’m not still a kid living at the Burrow, with Mum and me downstairs baking everything under the sun and my brothers eating it all up nearly as fast as we pull it out of the oven. Some habits are hard to break.”

James wished that they were having Christmas at the Burrow like they normally did. He asked, “Will we see Grandma and Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione and everybody?”

“We’ll probably talk to them by Floo,” Ginny answered, using her wand to stop a huge wooden spoon from stirring a bowl of dough. “But not until tomorrow after breakfast. It’s always so difficult to remember the time change and all. We’re lucky we’re connected to the international Floo Network at all. If it wasn’t necessary for your father’s work...” Her voice trailed away, distracted. She pulled the refrigerator door open so quickly that the milk bottles rattled, and then stood staring into it, as if she’d forgotten what she was looking for.

“Where is Dad anyway?” James asked, frowning. “And Petra too?”

Ginny let the refrigerator door swing closed again and looked at James, her face tense. “He’s working,” she said, and then drew a brisk sigh. “I haven’t told your brother or sister this, James, so if you breathe a word about it to them, I swear I’ll blend cockroaches into your eggnog. If I don’t tell *someone*, though, I think I’ll burst. The fact is: your father’s on a raid.”

“Ah,” James said, nodding. “And you’re worried about him.”

“Nonsense,” she lied unconvincingly. “Your father can take care of himself. With any luck, he’ll be home within the hour. It’s a big night for him. If all goes well...”

“Who’s he raiding?” James asked in a low, eager voice. “Did he track down those W.U.L.F. nutters?”

“Shh!” Ginny rasped sharply, and then visibly calmed herself. “Sorry. Yes.” She came over to meet James at the little breakfast bar. “I’m so nervous lately. Those Magical Integration Bureau men were bad enough, lurking in their black cars on the corner, watching our windows, following your father around when he so much as goes to the store for milk and bread. Now, there’re people from

the American legal administration as well, hovering about like bats in their black cloaks and hats. They're worse, since you never know where they are. If tonight goes well for your father, though..."

"What'd he find?" James prodded, eyes wide. "Did he track down the people who attacked us on the train?"

Ginny shook her head, more in wonderment than negation. "It's huge," she whispered, "this Wizard's United Liberation movement. It wasn't just the attack on the *Zephyr*. They were the ones who hired those pirates to waylay us during our voyage. They've been dead set against us being here at all, and for good reason. Titus Hardcastle and your father have been tracking them for months, even calling in some favors with Draco Malfoy at Gringotts. I'm amazed that Draco helped at all, considering how much trouble he could get into if his goblin bosses found out. There's financial support going into the W.U.L.F. from all over the world, but the base is right here in the United States. Titus and your father followed the money and finally found the organization's underground headquarters. A group of American wizarding police are helping your father right now. With any luck, they've already descended on the place and rounded up the ringleaders."

"Wow," James breathed, impressed. "I wish I could see it!"

Ginny shuddered. "Ugh, not me. I can barely stand to think of it. All of those awful people, and your father right in the middle of them."

"Dad can take care of himself," James grinned, mimicking his mother's words. "Remember? Nobody out-Aurors him. Those W.U.L.F. gits will be spending Christmas in Azkaban."

Ginny nodded. "I'm sure you're right. But I doubt they'd send them back home for that. They'll do their time here in the States. I can only hope that they find that poor Muggle senator and rescue him. Who knows what they've filled his head with by now, assuming he's, er..."

"Still alive?" James suggested.

"Don't talk that way," his mum shuddered again. "Go and say hello to Petra, why don't you? She's up in her room. First door on the right."

James nodded and dropped lightly from his stool. Tramping up the stairs, he heard Albus and Lucy talking nearby, their voices echoing into the hall. The second door on the right was cracked open, but the room beyond was dark. James knocked lightly on the door.

"Hey Petra," he called softly, not wishing to wake her if she was napping. "Happy Christmas. Come downstairs and help me eat some of these desserts, eh?"

The door creaked open a little at James' knock. He peered inside with one eye. In the dimness, he could see two narrow beds and a dresser. One of the beds was rumples, the pillows humped together haphazardly.

"Petra?" James called again, pushing the door further open. The room was empty, although the bed certainly appeared to have been recently occupied. He frowned into the room, and then turned and retreated back into the hall. He followed Albus and Lucy's voices until he found them in a bedroom near the end, kneeling on the floor next to a pile of wrapped presents.

“Oh,” Albus said, glancing up at James and lowering his brow. “It’s just you. We thought Mum was onto us.”

James frowned, watching as his brother trained his wand on one of the larger presents. “What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like,” Albus replied. “Getting a peeksie. Hang back if you don’t want to know whether you’re getting a new skrim or a box of underpants.”

James shook his head. “Have either of you seen Petra yet?”

Lucy glanced up. “No,” she said, tilting her head. “Why?”

“Just wondering. I thought I’d say hello. That’s all.”

Lucy shrugged and shook her head, her eyes still on James.

“All right,” he replied. “Whatever. Carry on, then.”

“Don’t tell Mum,” Albus warned as James turned away. “I’ll hex you good if you do.”

On the way down the hall, James peered into Petra and Izzy’s bedroom again. It was still dark and empty, although the rumpled bed gave the strangest impression that someone had been lying on it only moments before. James shook his head again and tromped back down the stairs.



Dinner came and went and James’ dad still had not arrived home.

The rest of the adults tried to maintain a festive atmosphere, but James sensed that there was a lot of tension in the air. Audrey and Percy sat near the fireplace and roasted chestnuts while Ginny and Denniston Dolohov cleaned up the kitchen, talking idly in low voices. Petra had not shown up for dinner at all, which James thought was a little odd.

“She’s begun keeping rather strange hours ever since the debacle with that Mr. Henredon,” Ginny had admitted to James. “I think she’s worried and afraid, poor thing. I can’t blame her. A new country, and all of a sudden, she’s in legal trouble, all over a case of mistaken identity. I mean, I feel bad for the poor man who was attacked, but to accuse a teenaged girl of such a thing...”

“But,” James said, furrowing his brow, “she wasn’t upstairs when I went up to say hi to her. Her room was empty.”

Ginny shrugged. “She was probably in the loo, silly.”

James frowned. He was almost certain that the bathroom had been empty as well when he’d passed it, but he didn’t press the issue. Shortly thereafter, Petra had, in fact, come down the stairs, smiling sleepily and greeting everyone.

“Hi James,” she said, coming to join him on the couch. “Sorry. I was napping. I’ve been doing that a lot lately. I think it’s for lack of anything better to do.”

James blinked at her, perplexed. “You...,” he began, but stopped himself. He shook his head slightly. “Never mind. How have you been?”

“All right,” she replied, looking toward the fire. “Reading, mostly. Professor Baruti comes by in the evenings sometimes and helps me with my French. He’s very kind and understanding about all of this.”

James thought for a moment. Finally, in a quiet voice, he said, “I think we’ve come up with a way to clear your name, Petra.”

She turned back to him, frowning slightly. “How?”

James wobbled his head back and forth, unsure how much to say. “It’s complicated. But Zane and Ralph are helping. I think we might be onto something. If it works out, we’ll find the people who really did attack the Vault of Destinies and steal the crimson thread. Then you’ll be in the clear.”

To James’ surprise, Petra was looking at him doubtfully. “Are you sure that’s a good idea, James? I mean, it sounds...,” she paused, as if choosing her words very carefully, “... er, dangerous.”

“Maybe,” James admitted. “But it’s worth it, isn’t it? I mean, Petra, you’re in really serious trouble here. If that arbiter, Keynes, says you’re guilty of attacking the Vault and freezing Mr. Henredon, you could go to prison for a long, long time. If there’s something I can do to stop that from happening—”

Petra smiled at James as if he was rather silly. “I won’t go to prison, James. Izzy and I will be fine. We’ve been through worse scrapes.”

“You have?” James frowned incredulously. “Petra, that Keynes idiot was serious. Mum says there are more of his kind floating around the streets outside, keeping an eye on the flat, making sure you don’t make a break for it or something. You can’t just blow this off. Izzy needs you. And so do... er, other people. If you get sent to wizarding prison...”

Petra sighed deeply. “I’m not blowing it off, James. I just... I can’t worry about that. Not now. There are other things. More important things.”

“Petra,” James exclaimed, exasperated. “What’s more important than being accused of attempted murder and the theft of some crazy dimensional artifact?”

In answer, Petra looked at James and smiled a little crookedly. “You tell me, James. We’re still connected, aren’t we? That silver cord you conjured, it’s still there, even now. Don’t you feel it?”

James glanced down at his right hand. He opened it, palm up on his lap. He *could* feel the cord, now that she had mentioned it. He could even (although it might have been his imagination) see it very faintly.

“No,” he lied. “I think it’s faded away now. I can’t see your dreams anymore.”

Petra held up her own hand. James looked at it in the light of the fireplace. “You can’t lie to me, James, even if you want to,” Petra said, her voice low, amused. Slowly, she lowered her own hand onto his. When they touched, James felt a small burst of mingled heat and cold. It spread up his arm, making him shiver, and yet he didn’t pull his hand away. Underneath the thrumming energy of the magical cord, he could feel the prosaic thrill of Petra’s hand resting upon his, her fingers cool and slender, curling around the heel of his palm. He looked up at her, speechless.

“The cord is still there,” she said very quietly. “It connects us, probably forever, because you were willing to die for me. I know that now, James. But instead of making a trade—your life for mine, like the laws of deep magic demand—you tapped into something even deeper. Something beyond normal magic. Do you know what that is?”

James hadn’t really considered it, not since that night on the stern of the *Gwynndemere*, but now, looking into Petra’s eyes, he thought he did know the answer after all. He nodded.

“It came from *you*, somehow,” he said, not a little awe in his voice. “I tapped into your power, the same power you used to reconnect the anchor chain to the ship without even using your wand. The power you almost used on Keynes when he was trying to separate you and Izzy that day in Administration Hall.”

Petra nodded, her face solemn. “You tapped into my power, yes. I don’t know how. Maybe because of how you feel for me and because of what we’ve been through together, and maybe even just because of the intensity of the moment. You were willing to trade your life for mine, but the magic was bigger than that. The magic saved *both* of us. But, James, things like that don’t happen without a price. I fear that someday...”, she shook her head and looked away again, toward the flickering flames of the fireplace, “someday you might regret it.”

James was shocked. “No way!” he whispered harshly, noticing the look his Aunt Audrey was giving them from across the room. He lowered his voice again and went on. “Petra, that’s crazy. I’d do it again right now. And I’ll do whatever I can to find the people who really did curse Mr. Henredon so you can be free again. But Petra—” He stopped and knitted his brow. Barely whispering, he went on, “How can all of this be? What makes you so... *powerful* all of a sudden?”

Petra drew a long, deep breath, thinking. Finally, she met his eyes again. “I’ve always had that power,” she admitted. “I didn’t understand it, and neither did anyone else, especially my grandparents. They were afraid of me because my magic was so much greater than theirs. They didn’t believe I would know how to use it, that I would grow up to be something terrible and cruel. But their fear shamed me. As a result, I trained myself not to use my powers. I taught myself to use a wand instead of just my hands. The wand was like a funnel, making the magic smaller, weaker, more like everyone else’s. Eventually, by the time you first met me, I’d become so used to the wand that I’d forgotten what it was like to work magic without it.”

James' brow was still furrowed as he listened to her, but she was looking past him now, her eyes unfocused, her hand still on his.

"Now, though, both of my grandparents are dead," she said faintly. "There's no reason to hide anymore. I broke my wand on my last night at Papa Warren's farm. I didn't do it on purpose. I just let it feel the full weight of my powers. It broke right down the middle, split as if it had been struck by lightning, just like my very first wand, when I was a little girl and hadn't yet learned how to rein it in. Now I don't need a wand. Now I'm learning to use the power the way I was meant to. That's what you tapped into, James," she said, focusing on him again. "For better or worse, you locked us together. When you conjured this silver cord, you bound us, maybe forever. Soul to soul. And that, James, you may well someday regret. Someday, you may curse yourself for it, and me too."

James' thoughts swam as he looked at the slight girl next to him. It all sounded perfectly daft to him, and yet he could sense the honesty of her words. She believed everything she said. If she hadn't been touching him, her hand on his, making the silver cord pulse like a dynamo, he might have been able to doubt her. Now, however, tiny shreds of memories came into his head, directly from Petra's own thoughts.

He saw her as a young girl, closing a set of window drapes with a wave of her small hand. Another memory showed her in a sunlit wood, moving rocks through the air with a pointing finger, forming them into carefully constructed, mysteriously sad towers. Finally, he saw her as a ten-year-old girl standing frightened in the darkness of a cellar, several rats lying dead at her feet. She had thought the rats to death, merely sending her mind into their little beating hearts and squeezing them, bursting the little organs like balloons. She had hated the rats and feared them, but lying there dead at her feet, their feet curled and their black eyes staring like drops of oil, Petra felt terrible about what she had done. She tried to think them back to life, but that was where her powers—her prodigious, mysterious powers—ended. She could kill, but she could not return to life. Young Petra cried in the darkness of the cellar, cried for the rats that she had first feared, and then, when it was too late, pitied. She cried for her own lost innocence. She was, after all, a rat murderer.

And then, buried beneath all of these secret visions, curling under and through them like a snake, was a memory of a woman's voice, crying out with terror and a sort of mad, vindictive spite. *I always knew you'd be the death of me, you horrible girl*, the voice screeched. *And I was right! I was riiiigghht!*

James shook himself. Involuntarily, he pulled his hand away from Petra's. The visions, and the mad, screeching voice, stopped at once. Petra blinked at him, and then, sheepishly, she pulled her own hand back.

"Petra," James whispered. "How is this possible? What... what kind of witch are you?"

Petra sighed once more and shook her head. "I'm not a witch, James."

In the warmth of the room, James felt suddenly cold. He remembered the vision of the black castle and the strange, dead island. Like the visions he had seen when Petra had touched him only moments before, that had also been a peek into Petra's dreams and thoughts. And in *that* vision, the

Morgan part of Petra's mind, somehow separate and imprisoned, had spoken aloud: *I am the Princess of Chaos*, she had said. *I am the Sorceress Queen*.

The *Sorceress Queen*.

James opened his mouth, not sure what he was about to say, when Lily, Molly, and Izzy suddenly ran past, their feet thumping wildly, their voices giggling like a flock of birds.

"Tag!" Izzy said, tapping James on the shoulder. "You're it!"

With a flurry of screams and laughter, the three girls scurried away. James watched them, and then turned back to Petra.

"You're it," she smiled, shrugging one shoulder. "You'd better go get them."

"Petra," James began, but she shook her head.

"No more for now, James," she said, and James could sense that she meant it. "Besides, I think they just ran into your father's study. You'd best herd them back out before they disturb any of his things."

James could barely bring himself to interrupt his hushed conversation with Petra, especially when he felt so close to such an important revelation, but he didn't seem to have any choice. Petra had already turned away, standing and moving toward the fire. With a great sigh, James stood as well.

"All right, you lot," he began as he entered the study door. "You know you're not supposed to be in here. Especially you, Lil—"

He was drowned out by a cacophony of giggles and shrieks as all three of the girls scrambled from behind chairs and under tables. They rushed past him, obviously hoping that he meant to chase them. James shook his head in weary annoyance, marveling at how his sister seemed to play down to the level of the youngest child in her presence, and then looked around the study to ensure that nothing had been disturbed.

The room was rather like a small library, crowded with chairs, end tables, and lamps. The far end was dominated by a large desk and a leather swivel chair with a very high back. The chair was about as un-Harry-Potter as anything James had ever seen. Its high, pointed shoulders were adorned with silver rivets, making it look, on the whole, like something that belonged in the basement of Erebus Mansion. Obviously, the flat had come already furnished. James knew that his father would never pick out such a thing for himself.

Moving toward the desk, James reached over it and gave the chair a tentative push. It turned silently, revolving somewhat malevolently on its oiled base. Behind the chair, propped on a low shelf below the window, was the small Shard of the *Amsera Certh* that Merlin had given his dad. Its face was silvery with rushing smoke, unfocused. James knew that it connected, when magically empowered, to the Auror offices back at the Ministry of Magic. Using the Shard, his father kept in close contact with Titus Hardcastle and the other Aurors.

Below the Shard, in the shadow of the shelf, was a gleaming iron lockbox. James' eyes widened. This, he knew, was the lockbox that his father had taken to keeping his Invisibility Cloak and Marauder's Map in ever since last year, when they had been stolen out of his trunk by Scorpius Malfoy. James moved quickly around the desk, his curiosity getting the better of him. Stopping the huge leather chair from turning, he sat down on it, facing the window. He tapped the lockbox with his wand.

"*Alohomora*," he whispered quickly.

There was a flash of golden light, and for a moment, James thought that his basic Unlocking Spell had worked. The flash didn't diminish, however. It spun around the lockbox, as if repelled from the iron shape. Finally, with a crackle of magical energy, the bolt spat back at James, striking him in the chest and shoving both him and the chair backwards. The chair rammed against the desk, producing a rattling thud.

James shook himself, alarmed, and quickly rammed his wand back into his pocket, scrambling to get up. He should have known that his father's counter-spells would repel anything that he, James, might use to open the lockbox.

There were footsteps just outside the study. A shadow moved on the partially open door. Without thinking, James dropped back onto the huge desk chair. The chair began to spin again and he clumped his feet to the floor, halting its movement. He stared furiously out the darkened window in front of him and held his breath.

The door swept open behind him, and James realized, with some bemusement, that he could see the entire room reflected in the high study window. The shape of the batwing chair blocked out a lot of the reflection, of course, but he could see the top of the door and indistinct shadows on the nearby bookshelves as someone entered the room, leaving the door wide open behind them.

"What would Dumbledore say?" the figure mumbled quietly, and James realized, with a mixture of relief and trepidation, that it was his father. Harry Potter had finally returned from his raid. He sighed quietly to himself, "Think, Potter. What would Dumbledore say? Or even Snape?" And then, in a louder voice, "In here, gentlemen. Close the door behind you, if you would."

Slowly, James hunkered lower in the black chair, keeping his feet planted firmly on the floor to prevent it from swiveling around and revealing him. More footsteps approached and in the window's reflection, James saw two more men enter the room. They wore the black suits and ties of the Magical Integration Bureau.

"I thought it best," Harry said, moving toward his desk and leaning on it, facing the men, "that we debrief immediately. Thank you for coming inside."

"We wouldn't have it any other way," one of the men said stiffly. The image in the window's reflection was somewhat distorted, but James recognized the man. He was the one they had first met outside the *Zephyr* after the crashing attack along the streets of Muggle New York. His name, James recalled, was Price.

“Well then,” Harry began briskly, “it seems that our information was accurate enough. That is one good thing we can take from this evening’s exercise. The W.U.L.F. is on the run. We can expect that they will be much clumsier now, having been routed from their headquarters.”

“And this seems like a good thing to you?” Price said evenly. “I don’t know about you, but I’d rather stamp out the whole nest of spiders at once than try to chase them one by one into the shadows. Wouldn’t you, Espinosa?”

“I sure wouldn’t call tonight a win for the good guys,” Espinosa replied coolly. “They know we’re onto them now. They’ll be watching for us. No more element of surprise.”

“We have eyes all over the city,” Harry said. “Now that Tarrantus’ agents are on the run, we will surely sense their movements. If we have to track them down one by one, then that’s how we will do it. It wouldn’t be the first time the Department of Aurors disassembled a network of dark wizards one brick at a time.”

Espinosa commented, “Would’ve been a lot easier if we’d have been able to take Tarrantus alive.”

“Sure would,” Price nodded, and James could see that he was watching Harry closely. “I don’t suppose you magical types have the ability to extract information from the dead, do you? No? That’s a shame. And here we ‘Muggles’ all thought you were so much more advanced than that.”

“Necromancy is a forbidden art,” Harry replied. “Not that it was ever particularly accurate, even for those who excelled at it.”

“Pretty convenient,” Price countered. “Tarrantus being found murdered in his recently abandoned headquarters and us not being able to interview the deceased to find out where his people might have escaped to or what their plans were.”

“No sign of the missing senator, either,” Espinosa added reasonably. “*Very* convenient.”

“Convenient for *whom*, exactly?” Harry said, and James heard the barely restrained anger in his voice. “Since I’ve been spearheading the international search for these villains, I can say that the lack of any prominent leads and the apparent murder of their leader is decidedly *inconvenient*. I had very high hopes that this whole mess would be concluded tonight, as you well know.”

“So you keep saying,” Price countered. “And yet there is no question that *somebody* alerted the W.U.L.F. to our raid only minutes before our arrival, giving them just enough time to escape. Not to mention the very damning fact that your name, Mr. Potter, was scrawled on the wall with the victim’s own blood.”

“A warning,” Harry said stonily. “They want me gone, precisely because we are this close to capturing them. They’ve been attempting to thwart our attempts ever since they hired a fleet of pirates to sink us on the journey here. Tarrantus himself led the attack on the train and personally delivered the warning, telling us to leave immediately or face the consequences.”

“And now, Tarrantus is lying cold in a wizarding morgue in downtown New Amsterdam,” Espinosa nodded. “I mean, it *could* be that the name written in blood on the wall was a warning

that you should give up and run home, Mr. Potter. But we cannot rule out that it might, in fact, have been the victim's way of identifying his killer."

"That's ridiculous, Mr. Espinosa, if you'll pardon me for being blunt," Harry said coldly, "even apart from the fact that I was *with you* at the time the man was killed. I've seen Killing Curses in action in my time. The curse that ended Tarrantus' life was not only brutal, it was instantaneous. He wasn't just killed. He was destroyed. I promise you, there were no final moments during which the man could have scrawled the name of his murderer on the wall in his own blood. Tarrantus was dead before he hit the floor and someone else wrote my name on the wall with his blood."

Espinosa asked, "And why would the W.U.L.F. have murdered their own leader only moments before their escape from our raid?"

"Perhaps for being sloppy," Harry suggested curtly. "After all, it was his own paper trail that led us to him. Organizations like the W.U.L.F. do not easily forgive such ineptitude."

"Could be," Price agreed reluctantly. "Then again, it could be that Tarrantus was getting ready to talk. Maybe he was getting cold feet about the organization's tactics and was planning on telling us everything he knew. Maybe someone else decided he was a threat and planned to overthrow him as leader. They'd have no choice but to kill him, of course. Whoever tipped them off about the impending raid, seems likely to me that that's the same person who's probably in charge now. What do you think, Espinosa?"

"Just makes sense," Espinosa agreed. "Find the snitch, find the murderer. Find the murderer, find the new head of the W.U.L.F."

"And you think that person is me," Harry said with a sigh.

Price shook his head. "We're paid to be suspicious, Mr. Potter. Don't take offense. If we had any actual evidence of your involvement, then we wouldn't be standing here in your study having this little chat. But I'll be honest with you. There's loads of circumstantial evidence piling up against you. The bloody name on the wall doesn't help."

Harry's voice was no longer restrained. "That's insane," he proclaimed darkly.

"Lotta things are insane, Mr. Potter," Price agreed. "Wanting to maintain power over non-magical people by not sharing your world with them, that seems a little insane to some of us. Conjuring up shadowy villains like the W.U.L.F. to scare your own people into living by outdated laws of secrecy, that also seems pretty insane. Of course, all of this is just conjecture at this point, I admit. But if it ever *stops* being conjecture, well..."

"The W.U.L.F. is *not* a creation of the Department of Aurors," Harry said with cold emphasis. "Has it even begun to occur to you that it might have been one of *your* men who tipped them off about the impending raid? Frankly, if the Wizard's United Liberation Front believes what they claim, then your own people are much more sympathetic with them than is the Department of Aurors."

"Really, Mr. Potter," Price chided. "That's a little childish, isn't it? You perceive that we are accusing you, so you accuse us in response. I expected better from you."

“*Someone* alerted them that we were coming,” Harry insisted. “On my side, the only people who knew about the raid were Titus Hardcastle and myself.”

“And we have your word for that only,” Price said, effecting an apologetic tone of voice. “Be reasonable, Mr. Potter. Do you mean to say that you didn’t tell anyone else at the Ministry of Magic? Or even your wife and family?”

“I mean to tell you that those on my side who knew about today’s raid,” Harry growled, “are people who I trust completely. Members of our raiding party, including myself, might have gotten killed today had the W.U.L.F. chosen to ambush us instead of run. Why would my own people have risked that?”

“If your people and the W.U.L.F. are one and the same,” Espinosa suggested, “then it wouldn’t be a risk at all, would it?”

Harry drew a deep breath, composing himself. “Gentlemen, if this is where we stand, then I fail to see how we can continue to work together. Either arrest me for conspiracy or let me and my associates work alone.”

“Now let’s not get huffy, Harry,” Price said, softening his tone and raising his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “Espinosa and I are just doing our jobs. The task of the Magical Integration Bureau is to protect the interactions between the magical and the non-magical world and to see that the two coexist with as much harmony as possible. Your people have chosen to hide yourselves and live among us in secrecy, which has always struck the Bureau as suspicious on the very surface of it. You can’t blame us for approaching our duties with a degree of healthy skepticism, can you? Look, if you’re innocent, then you have nothing to fear from our involvement. If you’re guilty, then of course we can’t just allow you to operate without our supervision. Either way, Harry, you’re stuck with us. Let’s try to make that fact as pleasant as possible, eh?”

There was a long pause as Harry appeared to consider this. In the window reflection, James could see Price standing to the side, his face stony, waiting. Across from him, Espinosa looked vaguely bored. He stared up at the dark ceiling, eyebrows raised inscrutably.

“So be it,” Harry finally said. “But if I suspect that your notions of mistrust are undermining our investigations, or worse, placing us all in danger, then be assured that I will abandon this mission, regardless of the consequences. Is that understood?”

“Duly noted,” Price said with a smile. “I’m glad that we can all dispense with any pretenses. Everything all out in the open. That’s the way I like it. Right, Espinosa?”

“Right you are, Price,” the other man agreed soberly.

“I assume you can find the door on your own,” Harry replied. “Merry Christmas, gentlemen, and goodnight.”

James heard shuffling footsteps and saw the door’s reflection as it opened again. A few moments later, the elevator doors dinged from down the hall. Price and Espinosa, apparently, were on their way back down to the parking garage.

Without turning the chair around, James asked quietly, “You know I’m here, don’t you?”

Harry, still leaning against the front of the desk, chuckled drily. “I never leave my chair facing the window. I figured it was either you or Albus. Frankly, I was betting on the latter.”

“Nice counter-spell on the lockbox,” James said, swiveling the chair to face his father. “I wasn’t trying to nick the cloak and map, you know. I was just... checking on them.”

Harry nodded, looking back at his son over his shoulder. With a sigh, he turned around and plopped onto one of the visitor’s chairs.

“So, what do you think, James?” he asked. “Is this whole investigation a lost cause?”

“Why would they think you were involved with the same bad guys that you’re trying to catch?” James exclaimed incredulously. “I mean, it doesn’t make any sense!”

“It makes sense from *their* viewpoint,” Harry said sadly. “You were at Neville’s assembly, so you heard how a lot of people around here think. Many of them truly believe that the Ministry of Magic would indeed stoop to creating shadow villains, from Voldemort to the W.U.L.F., just to keep the magical world under their thumb. If that was true, then it would make perfect sense that I’d be in on it, and might even be one of the masterminds of the scheme.”

“That’s what Ralph said, too,” James acknowledged reluctantly. “But none of it’s true! How can they believe such a bunch of drivel?”

Harry frowned thoughtfully. “Once you abandon the concept of truth, James, everything becomes merely a matter of *perspective*. For the Progressive Element, there is no right or wrong; there are only sides. When one of those sides defeats another, they don’t see it as a triumph of good over evil or evil over good. They view it merely as one side exerting unfair power over the other. Without truth—without any belief in right and wrong—the best one can hope for in life is a sort of lukewarm concept of fairness, where both sides in any fight simply choose to live and let live. They think that what we call ‘good’ should just learn to tolerate what we call ‘evil’ since good and evil are really just equally valid philosophies of life.”

“But,” James began, screwing up his face in an effort to understand. “But, that’s obviously crazy. This isn’t like disagreeing over whether flying carpets should be legal or not. Voldemort was a bloodthirsty villain who killed people just for the sake of his own power. Stopping him was the only way to save countless other lives, wasn’t it?”

“Not according to the Progressive Element,” Harry replied, shaking his head. “They think that if only we’d stopped fighting him, laid down our weapons, and given him his right to live the way he wanted to, then we’d all have just lived in peace, somehow.”

James considered this for a moment, his eyes narrowed, and then shrugged. “But then he’d just have killed every last one of you.”

Harry nodded. “Probably. Voldemort wasn’t a ‘live and let live’ sort of wizard, especially considering the prophecy. One of us had to die for the other to survive. But really, prophecy or not, that’s how it is in every corner of the world, in every struggle between evil and good, between power and love. The two cannot compromise because they cancel each other out. There will always be a struggle between them until one prevails over the other. There is no alternative.”

“So, all these Progressive Element types are complete nutters, then?” James said, throwing up his hands.

“Not all of them,” Harry replied with a sigh. “They *are* right that a lot of awful things have been done throughout the ages in the name of good. Merlin himself tells of battles that occurred between the magical and non-magical peoples of his day, not over right and wrong, as they pretended to be, but over mere prejudice and fear, intolerance and hatred. These are the things we must always be wary of at all costs. And yet, to deny that some struggles are, indeed, worthy of the fight—that evil and good are always alive and in enmity against one another, like fire and water—is to turn a pragmatic truth into a dangerous delusion. This, James, is what the Progressive Element is guilty of. Most of them are not bad, and most of them are very well-meaning. But that does not mean that their philosophy is not, in the end, thoroughly deadly.”

James thought on this for a long moment. Finally, he asked, “So who do you think ratted you all out?”

Harry shook his head again, his face growing dark. “I don’t know. Hardly anyone knew about the raid. But I suspect that Espinosa and Price are right. Whoever warned them about us also killed their leader, Tarrantus, and left his body for us to find. The W.U.L.F. has a *new* leader now, someone who may well know a lot more about us and how we plan to stop them than Tarrantus ever did. I suspect that the first order of business is to find out who that person is. Then, perhaps we will know how to proceed.”

“But who could it have been, Dad?” James asked earnestly, leaning forward over the desk. “I mean, Mum knew, and maybe Lil...”

“Even if they did tell someone else,” Harry replied, narrowing his eyes, “nobody sent any messages out of the flat, either via Floo or even through the Shard. I’ve set up hexes to alert me anytime there is any communication between the flat and the outside world, just to make sure that no one is spying on us. If any message had gone out, I’d have known about it.” Suddenly, Harry looked up at his son, his eyes sharp. “James, did any of you come or go over the last few hours? Besides Percy, I mean. After the time you arrived, did anyone go out? Even for a little stroll around the neighborhood?”

“No, Dad,” James said, but then he paused. Unbidden, he found himself thinking of Petra’s empty bed upstairs when he had gone to look for her. He’d searched through all of the upstairs rooms, but hadn’t seen any sign of her. And yet, some time later, she had come downstairs, as if she’d been up in her bedroom all along. James was still shaking his head, but his thoughts spun onward, turning cold and fearful. Petra would have known about the raid. But *surely* she wouldn’t have warned the villains even if she could have somehow Disapparated from the flat without anyone noticing. Would she?

“Well, I don’t know, then,” Harry said, leaning back in his chair again. “But I’ll find out. Whoever it was that leaked the information about the raid and killed Tarrantus, I’ll find them. And when I do, they’ll be sorry they ever took over for him. I’ll make very sure of that.”

James nodded, but inside he felt numb and deeply frightened.

I am the Princess of Chaos, he thought, remembering the dream-vision of Morgan, the shadowy figure that had spoken with Petra's voice. *I... am the Sorceress Queen...*



Christmas at the flat seemed to go by in a rather hectic rush, juggled between the much shorter Alma Aleron holiday break, Harry and Percy's constant work demands, and James' spinning thoughts about Petra, the W.U.L.F., Professor Ignatius Magnussen, and the Magical Integration Bureau.

Christmas Day was the only somewhat relaxing day of the break, during which time the family opened their presents and visited with Grandma Weasley, Uncle Ron, Aunt Hermione, and the rest via Floo. From his mother, James did indeed get a box of new underpants as well as a new winter cloak. His father, however, had purchased James a brand new pair of Clutchcudgel gauntlets from a wizarding sporting goods store in New Amsterdam. The gloves were leather, colored Bigfoot orange and blue, with a chamois-lined wand sleeve in the left wrist. Denniston Dolohov had gotten Ralph a new wizard chess set with enchanted pieces that could, if desired, play themselves. The pieces had been especially hexed by a famed wizard chess champion so that Ralph could practice the game alone whenever he couldn't find a suitable opponent. Petra, to James' surprise, had managed to procure Izzy a new dollhouse and china doll, which Izzy had immediately christened Victoria Penelope.

"But never Vicky Penny," she warned, peering sternly at James, to which James nodded solemnly in agreement.

Petra, of course, having no surviving parents or grandparents, received no gift whatsoever. Ginny had confided in James that the girl had insisted they not buy her anything either.

"She says it's more than enough that we're letting her live with us during the investigation," she said as they dried dishes near the kitchen sink. "I respected her wishes, but it seems so depressing not to have any gifts to open at Christmas. Especially since she lost that brooch of hers on the voyage. She downplays it, but I think that brooch had special significance to her. She says it was a gift from her father for her first Christmas. Did you know that?"

James had not, and admitted that he'd never seen her wear it until earlier that summer. He assumed that the brooch had come in the box of Petra's father's things, sent to her by the Ministry of Magic upon her coming of age.

Having made no such Christmas deal with Petra himself, however, James slipped outside late Christmas evening and found a bunch of dry weeds rooted behind some dumpsters. These he transfigured into a very satisfactory display of roses and tulips, which he encased in a simple Timeloop Charm, preventing them from wilting. He carried the flowers back up to the flat and bound them with a length of leftover Christmas ribbon. Finally, while everyone else was gathered around the fire downstairs, he sneaked into Petra's room and left the bouquet on her dresser along with a small note which read, simply, 'Happy Christmas Petra'.

Content with his handiwork, James went to bed that night and fell almost immediately to sleep. He dreamed of Clutchcudgel with his new gauntlets, and zombie Professor Straidthwait's hollow chuckle, and the mysterious riddle of the halls of Erebus Castle, complete with a ghostly figure of Professor Magnussen stalking warningly in the dimness, his eyes like chips of mica. Finally, in the deepest chasm of the night, James dreamed of the flat island surrounded by crashing surf and low, iron clouds. He dreamed of the black castle, both ancient and steadfast, and the figure watching from the balcony, her gaze heavy and hot, watching, waiting. Was it she that had alerted the members of the W.U.L.F. of the impending raid? Had Morgan somehow killed Tarrantus, leaving Petra, her alter ego, to take the blame? In the pit of the night, wrapped in the guileless lucidity of dreams, James thought it was entirely possible.

He wouldn't remember any of it the next morning, but his dreaming self tried to send out the message, tried to warn his subconscious of what was to come. *My job isn't to save Petra from Keynes the arbiter*, he realized as he wafted through the dreaming vision of the island, gazing up at the shadowy balcony. *My job is to save Petra from Morgan.*

My job, he thought from the depths of sleep, *is to save Petra from herself.*

Thus finishes chapter sixteen. What did you think?

Tomorrow's chapter will be released by noon, CST, via www.jamespotterseries.com. In the meantime, come on over to the [Grotto Keep forum](#) to discuss what's happened thus far.